



# House Select Committee on Homeland Security Democrats

**JIM TURNER, Ranking Member**

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**March 24, 2004**

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***Statement of Congressman Jim Turner, Ranking Member of the House Select Committee on Homeland Security gave the following statement at the hearing today of the Subcommittee on Rules on “Homeland Security Jurisdiction: The Perspective of Committee Leaders.”***

I have said previously and will repeat again today: If you take homeland security seriously, you must reach the conclusion that there needs to be one Committee in the House of Representatives with oversight and legislative jurisdiction over the functions of the Department of Homeland Security.

There are a number of reasons I have reached this conclusion.

First, we need to do whatever we can in the Congress to help the Department of Homeland Security to be successful. Right now, we have dozens of full committees and scores of subcommittees overseeing the Department. We call senior Department officials to duplicative hearings. And we push the Department in multiple, sometimes conflicting policy directions. Congress is making the Department's substantial challenges more difficult.

Secretary Ridge agrees. At a hearing before our Committee he said, “I think it goes without saying that a streamlined process of oversight and accountability, in my judgment, would do both the executive branch and the legislative branch a world of good.

Let me provide one example. The Department launched an initiative called “One Face At the Border,” which attempts to merge the functions of the former customs and former immigration inspectors at our ports of entry. Without a Homeland Security Committee, the Ways and Means Committee and Judiciary Committee would both have jurisdiction over that small program, as would the Appropriations Committee and possibly the Government Reform Committee as well. The people who run “One Face At the Border” have to deal with many faces here in Congress.

My second main reason for advocating for a Homeland Security Committee is that I do not believe effective oversight over the Department can be accomplished with multiple Committees having responsibility for discrete sections of the Department. To illuminate this, let me describe the effort of the Select Committee, under Chairman Cox's leadership, to do a thorough review and authorization of the Department of Homeland Security's budget. This is a very important task, especially for a new Department.

Who would do this if we don't have a single homeland security committee? Who would look at the tradeoffs that every Department must make when developing a budget? Who would look at the cross-cutting issues that affect the Department at large rather than individual components – issues such as developing a comprehensive threat and vulnerability assessment? Who would focus on the serious management challenges facing the Department, such as those

pointed out by the Department's Inspector General today? The answer is, frankly, no one.

It appears to me that the witnesses today who argue that a new Committee is not necessary are disregarding the decision made by Congress and the President to create a Department of Homeland Security. This decision reflected a determination that it was critically important to bring diverse agencies under the direction of a Secretary whose focus – 24/7 – would be on security. Even though the Attorney General had tremendous expertise in immigration, and the Treasury Department had tremendous experience with customs, and the Transportation Department had tremendous knowledge of aviation security – these functions were placed in the Department of Homeland Security. For Congress to approve this reorganization, and the philosophy behind it, but fail to reorganize itself to deal effectively with the new reality, would be, to put it bluntly, the height of hypocrisy.

Does this mean that committees with years of experience and expertise in areas such as bioterrorism or aviation security should be stripped of any influence over these subjects? No. There are ways to have shared jurisdiction over issues where more than one committee has something to contribute. This is accomplished in many other areas. Jurisdictional arrangements can also be made for how Congress should handle non-homeland security responsibilities of the new Department.

Finally, I would like to deal head on with the idea that has been put forward that homeland security could be handled through a subcommittee on the Government Reform Committee. I served on the Government Reform Committee so I am familiar with the tremendous work it does on oversight and issues that affect government operations across the board. But I see no reason why we should consolidate jurisdiction over homeland security in the Government Reform Committee any more than we should provide it jurisdiction over health care, highway construction, or education.

Such a consolidation has not occurred in the Governmental Affairs Committee in the Senate and we have no way to predict whether it will. Rather than trying to mimic an illogical approach that may or may not happen in the Senate, I believe it would be far better to lead the way with the right approach. I also believe that if we create a strong Committee on Homeland Security in the House, the Senate will have no choice but to follow suit. This is exactly what happened with respect to the Appropriations Committee. The House took the right step of creating a separate appropriations subcommittee for the Department of Homeland Security. The Senate soon did the same thing.

I also want to express some skepticism about another idea – continuing the Select Committee in its current form for another Congress. While I believe we have made a positive contribution this year in a number of ways, this structure is not a permanent solution. In some ways, by creating yet another committee to which the new Department must report, we are part of the problem this year rather than the cure. And without meaningful authority and jurisdiction, the Select Committee is hamstrung in its efforts to legislate and conduct oversight.

I am certain that the right thing to do for the national security of our country is to create a permanent Homeland Security Committee. That Committee should have oversight with respect to all homeland security activities of the federal government. It should also have legislative jurisdiction over the full range of the Department of Homeland Security's operations. While I will not be serving in the next Congress, I do fear that if the Congress fails to take decisive action on this topic, and we suffer additional terrorist attacks in the United States, Congress will be held accountable for this failure.

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